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# **Social Marketers Playing to Win? Experiential Value Creation in Social Marketing Mobile Games**

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## **Introduction/Background**

The rapid change of technological trends in the marketplace has increased the difficulty for social marketers to reach consumers using traditional marketing channels (Della et al., 2008). Traditionally, social marketing interventions have typically used more conventional supporting products and services such as water counters for water conservation or condoms for sex safety. However, recently social marketers are witnessing the diminishing effectiveness of more traditional social products and services in encouraging the uptake and maintenance of behaviour. In light of the technological trends in the marketplace and diminishing effect of previous social products and services (Lefebvre, 2009), social marketers have been encouraged to look to alternate means of delivering valuable offerings.

Mobile games (m-games) are one particular technological tool which is now gaining popularity in social marketing. Concurrently, the gaming sector (including m-gaming) is experiencing tremendous development, with PWC predicting the sector to grow to \$14.4 billion by 2017 (PWC, 2013). This has further attracted social marketers as they look for a tool which provides accessibility and value to not just the social or health cause, but the consumer as well. However, presently there is a lack of scholarly work to validate the use of m-gaming in social marketing, and in particular, a lack of evidence of what experiential value social marketing m-games create for consumers. This is important given that experiential value in social marketing has shown to be a useful concept in evaluating the effectiveness of social marketing products and services (Zainuddin et al., 2011).

## **Experiential Value**

Experiential value is defined as the “interactive, relativistic, preference experience” (Holbrook, 2006, p. 715). The concept of experiential value can be used to explain consumers’ interactions and experiences with social marketing m-games. In the literature, there are three frameworks of experiential value which are relevant to investigating consumer interactions and experiences with social marketing m-games. The three relevant frameworks are proposed by Sweeney and Soutar (2001) and Mathwick, Malhorta and Rigdon (2001), both originating from Holbrook’s (1994) active/reactive and intrinsic/extrinsic conceptualisation of value, and Vargo and Lusch’s S-D logic.

In 2001, Sweeney and Soutar developed a conceptual framework which suggests that consumers seek products and services with functional, emotional, social and price value. The findings of Sweeney and Soutar (2001) have been replicated in a number of contexts

including social marketing, with Zainnudin et al. (2011) discovering that emotional, social, economic and altruistic value dimensions exist within breast screening services for older women. Whilst Sweeney and Soutar (2001) and Zannudin et al. (2011) findings are not technologically based, they still hint at potentially important experiential value dimensions for social marketing m-games, in particular social and emotional value.

Existing research suggests that games have the potential to positively contribute to people's social and emotional wellbeing. Socially, games have been shown to: encourage group interaction and involvement, resulting in significant friendships and personal development whilst supporting both short-term and long-term social behaviours (Gentile et al., 2009). Whereas emotionally, games have been shown to: contribute to positive emotions by increasing players levels of relaxation and reduce stress (Snodgrass et al., 2011). On the basis of this discussion, it is proposed that social and emotional dimensions of experiential value exist in social marketing m-games (see Appendix 1).

Although Sweeney and Soutar (2001) may identify important value dimensions such as social and emotional value, if applied to social marketing m-games they would not adequately explain the value sought or experienced by playing a game. This can be contributed to one main factor, Sweeney and Soutar (2001) framework of experiential value does not focus on the complexity of value that is delivered by technological mediums. Therefore, given Sweeney and Soutar's (2001) framework of experiential value cannot adequately explain value derived from technological mediums such as social marketing m-games, a framework which compliments these inadequacies is required, such as that proposed by Mathwick, et al. (2001).

Mathwick et al. (2001) proposed a framework of experiential value that has been effectively applied to electronic marketing tools including websites, blogs (Keng et al., 2009) and m-games (Okazaki, 2008). They propose four dimensions of experiential value: playfulness, aesthetics, customer return on investment, and service excellence. Past studies have demonstrated the appropriateness of Mathwick et al.'s (2001) framework of experiential value for social marketing m-games. For example, a commercial study by Okazaki (2008) examined the pleasure sought by players adopting m-games. He found that experiential value dimensions proposed by Mathwick et al. (2001), particularly playfulness, customer return on investment (CROI) and aesthetics, were applicable and useful in an m-gaming context. Okazaki's (2008) findings suggest Mathwick et al. (2001) framework provides useful insights to explaining the value package consumers experience and enjoy in an online entertainment venue such as m-games. In further support, Mulcahy, Russell-Bennett and Rundle-Thiele (2013) found evidence of the existence of all four dimensions of experiential value proposed by Mathwick et al. (2001) in social marketing online games. Based upon the previous discussion the following dimensions of experiential value are proposed: playfulness, aesthetics, customer return on investment and service excellence

Although Mathwick et al. (2001) framework of experiential value fills some gaps when investigating social marketing m-games, interactivity still remains a component which is not sufficiently explored. Academic discussion from the related theoretical concept of S-D logic (Vargo et al., 2008) hints that these studies have potentially overlooked some important dimensions of experiential value, including interactivity.

Interaction or interactivity is a key component of the definition of experiential value (Holbrook, 2006) and a key foundational premise of the related concept of S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Certainly interaction is a potentially important dimension of experiential value, especially in social marketing m-games. For example, from a S-D logic viewpoint,

Vargo and Lusch (2008) put forward that value comes from the interaction between producer and consumer, which creates a mutually beneficial and valuable relationship. This argument is supported in gaming where Hsu and Lu (2004) found that interaction encouraged further play and facilitated flow. On the basis of the discussion of the previous sections the following dimension of experiential value are proposed for social marketing m-games: interactivity.

### Conclusion

While experiential value is not something that many social marketers would normally focus upon in the evaluation of their program, it is an area that requires investigation. Empirical research into experiential value in mobile games in social marketing will be insightful given that past commercial research has shown that higher levels and different combinations of value lead to greater behavioural intentions and loyalty (Okazaki, 2008; Mulcahy et al., 2013). The use of qualitative techniques will allow for the identification of experiential value dimensions that exist within social marketing m-games and provide a foundation for further studies. Further studies may include quantitative methods using experimental designs to see if different experiential value dimensions exist within different social marketing m-games.

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#### Appendix 1. Proposed experiential value framework for social marketing m-games

